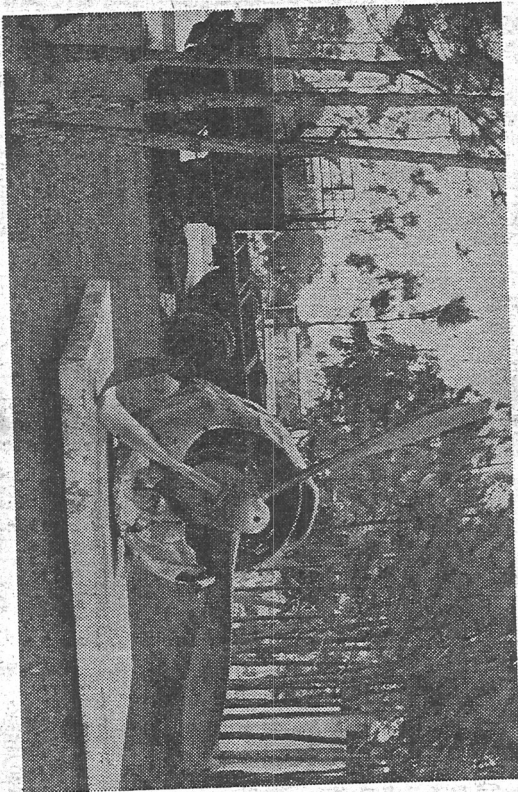


The Bay of Pigs: Imperialism's Waterloo



PLAYA LARGA, Cuba — One warm night, 13 years ago last spring, a small group of CIA-trained Cuban frogmen approached this rocky beach on the Bay of Pigs in a fiberglass boat.

They were to set up signals for a landing force that would establish a second beachhead from which the Cuban exiles of Brigade 2506 expected to launch a full-scale revolt to overthrow the two-year-old government of Prime Minister Fidel Castro.

Like the rest of the Bay of Pigs operation, the Playa Larga landing was plagued with mistakes and miscalculations of the strength of Castro's forces. The frogmen's first unpleasant surprise was being fired on by militia guards stationed in the shacks along the beach.

The shacks are gone now, and Playa Larga, about 95 miles southeast of Havana, is the site of one of the many "tourist centers" the Castro government has built for workers to visit during their two two-week vacations each year.

One balmy evening last month, as the sun set turned the sky and water to a dark orange color, a man and two boys were swimming in the bay. They wore "snorkel" face masks and flippers, an eerie reminder of the frogmen of 13 years ago. As they waded ashore, their bodies silhouetted against the orange sky, they could be heard talking to one another in Russian.

There is nothing unusual now about Rus-

sians swimming in the Bay of Pigs, and their numbers may soon increase.

Since Cubans do not believe in swimming during the "winter" months — when temperatures go down to the 70s or 60s — the government plans to open up many resorts like Playa Larga to foreign tourists, mostly from Eastern Europe.

More "tourist centers" have been built a few miles inland, in the swamps where the invaders battled Castro's forces in 1961 and where many of the exiles died of heat, thirst and starvation after the fighting was over.

The new resorts and the many reminders of the 72 hours of fighting in April of 1961 are just the most noticeable changes in this desolate and inhospitable area since the invaders were repelled.

The Bay of Pigs invasion is seen here as an event of great importance in the history of the Castro "revolution," and is constantly mentioned in books, speeches and movies. It is usually described as "the first great defeat of imperialism in the Americas."

All along the roads leading to Playa Larga and Playa Giron, where the first invaders landed, are colorful billboards with stylized renderings of soldiers and their weapons to mark the sites of important skirmishes. More than 80 large stone slabs mark the places where defenders of the Castro government were killed.

Both sides of the road are lined with scrubby vegetation. The soil is not good for agriculture, and, aside from the resorts, the

main industry appears to be manufacturing charcoal. At several spots along the road, there are large, carefully stacked mounds of smoldering wood.

At Playa Giron there is a school for fishermen and merchant sailors. A sign at the entrance says: "Welcome to Playa Giron; Death to the Invader." A burned tank and the engine of a destroyed airplane are on display, and a museum is nearby.

Twenty-seven miles to the north is another billboard saying: "The mercenaries were stopped here."

Across the street is a small, white painted primary school, one of thousands that have sprung up in country villages all over Cuba since Castro took power.

"I heard the shooting and bombing then," said Elida Noda, a toothless woman with leathery skin who was waiting for a bus beside the billboard. "My son here was seven months old. My father and brother were killed fighting other counter-revolutionaries in the mountains before the invasion."

Are things better now? "Divine," she replied, grinning. "When I was a girl, the school was too far away. I know almost nothing. My son goes to school now, and he's learning mechanics."

A younger woman, waiting with her two children, added: "There were not enough weapons then, so I helped by cooking for the soldiers. I'm a member of the militia now, and I would fight if it was necessary again."

—TERRI SHAW